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SUBJECT: BELARUS: REGIME AVOIDING RECOGNITION OF SOUTH OSSETIA AND
ABKHAZIA -- SO FAR

REF: A) VILNIUS 668, B) VILNIUS 663

¶1. (SBU) As discussed in reftels, the GOB has occasionally chosen a distinct approach to Georgia. Despite ridiculously elaborate praise of Russian aggression, Minsk has so far avoided calls from Moscow for the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. For now, the regime continues to play for time and consider its options.

Russian Pressure

¶2. (SBU) Local EU diplomats cite information shared by Prime Minister Sidorskiy with a regional counterpart that Moscow has directly tied the price of natural gas to recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Allegedly, if recognition moves forward, Gazprom would postpone the raise in price from USD 140 to USD 200/thousand cubic meters (TCM) that is due in January 2009. (Comment: Some observers calculate that step would save Belarus billions of USD in CY 2009. End comment.) In contrast, if the GOB does not recognize the two as independent states, the price of gas may be raised sooner (and/or higher).

Belarusian Obfuscation

¶3. (SBU) Regime talents for claiming action but not actually carrying through are being exercised on this topic. Lukashenka first pushed discussion of possible recognition to the CSTO summit in Moscow September 4, where it was not addressed in depth; he has subsequently stated that recognition could be taken up by the new Belarusian parliament that is to be elected September 28. Despite these pretences, senior GOB sources in Minsk have confirmed privately that a statement by Lukashenka is all that needed to effect recognition and that no parliamentary action would be required.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) Most observers believe that recognition is only a question of time, with the regime seeing what it can get in return. Georgian Ambassador David Zalkaliani told Charge September 18 that although he has been received several times since the crisis began by First Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Petrishenko, the GOB has not reached out to him in other ways, with not one Belarusian official signing the Georgian condolence book. Zalkaliani has stressed Georgia's economic ties with Belarus with his contacts, including growing investment, but agrees with others here that no combination of U.S. and EU enticements -- especially in a very challenging political climate -- can compare with potential carrots (or sticks) from Moscow. For our part, we will continue to stress to GOB interlocutors that recognizing Georgia's breakaway territories would have a direct, negative effect on the limited existing progress in our bilateral relationship.

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